

4th Sunday of Lent

Homily: Fr. Shijo George

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In the First Reading, through the words of the Lord to Joshua: “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” we see the desire of Yahweh to keep the people of Israel in a state of grace and prosperity; salvation from the disgrace of undergoing slavery, oppression, and mental and physical pain. And so it was upon their arrival at Canaan that the people of Israel were blessed with new hope, new land, and above all, a time of Grace with Yahweh: from Slavery to Freedom.

The Epistle of St. Paul to Corinthians in the Second Reading affirms that this grace and prosperity flourished through Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus Christ that all are saved and reconciled with the Father: that everything becomes a new creation through Jesus.

Following this thread of redemption, unconditional love, joy, and grace, the Gospel, this Sunday, recounts the story of the Prodigal Son; from his journey of son-ship to his prodigal return once again into son-ship. In fact, the whole chapter that is Chapter Fifteen of the Gospel of St. Luke Gospel contains beautiful stories and parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son teaches us that the Father’s Love knows no bounds; expounding on the theme of mercy, care, redemption, and the unconditional Love of God. If there were limits to the father’s love, and if he had conditions and standards for everything, the story would have been different and the prodigal son might have never thought to return to the father.

In his ever-famous novel, *The Alchemist* (Coelho, Paulo, January 1988, HarperTorch), novelist Paulo Coelho narrated a beautiful story around King Melchizedek telling a story to Santiago, the protagonist of the novel, about a boy who was sent by his father to learn the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world. The boy traveled for days and finally reached a beautiful palace on top of a mountain where the wise man lived. Instead of immediately teaching him the secret of happiness, the wise man gave the boy a spoon with two drops of oil and told him to walk around the palace without spilling the oil. The boy carefully wandered through the palace keeping his focus only on the spoon, and returned without spilling a drop.

The wise man then asked him: “Did you see the beautiful tapestries in my dining hall? The marvellous gardens? The rare manuscripts in my library?” The boy, having concentrated only on the oil, admitted that he had seen nothing. The wise man then instructed him to take another walk through the palace, this time admiring its beauty. The boy did so, noticing the grand architecture, the art, the gardens, and the magnificent surroundings. However, when he returned, he realized that he had spilled all the oil from the spoon. The wise man then told him: “The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, but never forget the drops of oil on the spoon.”



Likewise, the prodigal son had the oils of grace and son-ship along with a portion of his father's wealth, and like the boy in the story, he forgot about the precious oil. He didn't take good care of the treasures that were given to him, and because of his irresponsible decisions and actions, he lost everything. Where once he slept peacefully in his father's palace with good music, he now heard and was surrounded by the sound of pigs, their grunts, squeals, barking, and coughing. From a most comfortable palace to a pig sty. From the father's sumptuous table to the hog's floor and the pig's feeding trough. As soon as the son realized his misguidedness, he rose from his despair, took courage, and was determined to go back to his Father's home to make reparation.

As we celebrate *Laetare Sunday* today, a day of celebration and hope marked by the use of rose-colored vestments and the theme of rejoicing, derived from the Latin word "laetare" meaning "to rejoice", let us also reflect on our own lives. Do we feel real joy in our lives? Are we safeguarding the oils of grace that is our son-ship and daughterhood as children of God? Do we need to turn back to return to the palace of our Father and to His love and mercy?

Let us be aware of the state of our own lives and make a courageous decision, like the Prodigal Son, to say to ourselves: "I have a Father to return to."